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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000336

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: [IR](#) [KISL](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#)

SUBJECT: MGLE01: INDEPENDENT SHIA POLITICIANS SAY AOUNIST  
MINISTERS PREFERABLE TO HAVING HIZBALLAH IN THE CABINET

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)

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SUMMARY

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11. (C) Three independent Shia politicians from predominantly Shia areas of Lebanon separately told econoff in early February that Hizballah's role in the cabinet will only be disruptive. They said that Hizballah is seeking veto power and is unlikely to compromise on its arms. Ali Hamadeh, of the Biqa Valley, said that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora made a mistake by inviting Hizballah into his cabinet in the first place. He should have allied with MP Michel Aoun against Hizballah. According to Hamadeh, Hizballah's support is strong due to high confessional tensions. Hizballah's links to Iran do not appear to be a political liability, according to Hamadeh. Ahmad el-Assaad of southern Lebanon and Salah Harake of south Beirut each expect Hizballah to play a negative role in the cabinet and said that Siniora's best option is to remove ministers nominated by Amal-Hizballah and replace them by bringing Aoun into the government. End summary.

HAMADEH: HIZBALLAH POPULAR SUPPORT  
HIGH, ARMS COMPROMISE UNLIKELY  
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12. (C) On February 1, econoff met with Ali Hamadeh, a son of a former Speaker of Parliament, who unsuccessfully ran against the Amal-Hizballah alliance in the 2005 parliamentary elections. Hamadeh, a Shia from the Biqa Valley, was pessimistic about the prospects for pressuring Hizballah to disarm. He thought that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora had made a mistake by inviting Hizballah to join his cabinet in the first place. Siniora, in Hamadeh's opinion, should have brought MP Michel Aoun into his cabinet instead and then presented a united front against Hizballah. Now Siniora is in a dilemma. If Siniora allows Hizballah to leave the government, no Shia politician would dare fill the cabinet posts they left. Any Shia entering a Siniora government without the approval of the Amal-Hizballah alliance would be seen as a "Brutus," according to Hamadeh. On the other hand, if Siniora keeps Hizballah in his government, Hizballah will feel empowered to refuse to compromise on its arms.

13. (C) Hamadeh explained that confessional tensions, particularly between Sunni and Shia, since the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, have caused most of the Lebanese Shia to rally around Hizballah. He estimated that Hizballah now enjoyed the support of more than two-thirds of the Shia community. Hamadeh dismissed Amal as the tail of Hizballah. Hizballah has even parlayed Sunni-Shia tension into political

cover for its actions. The new rumor gaining credence in the Biga Valley, according to Hamadeh, is that the USG is intentionally provoking Sunni-Shia tensions in Iraq and Lebanon so that the Sunni terrorists and the Shia terrorists would kill each other off.

¶4. (C) Hamadeh did not expect Hizballah to compromise on its arms in the coming year. Hizballah's popularity, Siniora's timidity, and a lack of incentives weigh against Hizballah disarmament in the short term. Hamadeh did not see anything that Siniora could offer Hizballah in exchange for disarmament. In contrast, Hizballah risks serious disadvantages in disarming, such as loss of prestige, reduction in Iranian funding, and a claimed lack of defense against other confessional groups. Hamadeh saw Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri's recent call for a dialogue as an attempt by Hizballah to shut down talk of disarmament. The dialogue would likely fail, in part due to the actions of Berri and Hizballah. This failure of dialogue would then discourage further discussion of the issue, without the blame falling on Hizballah.

#### IRANIAN LINKS NOT A LIABILITY

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¶5. (C) According to Hamadeh, the issue of Iran's nuclear research program has had a counter-intuitive effect on Shia support for Hizballah. Instead of feeling like pawns set up to defend Iran's nuclear ambitions, most Shia support the alleged Iranian attempts to build a nuclear weapon. The feeling in the Shia community, according to Hamadeh, is that if Iran produces a nuclear bomb, then Shia in Lebanon will be safe under the Iranian nuclear umbrella. Few in the Shia community seem concerned that a conflict over Iranian nuclear

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ambitions could spill over into Lebanon, according to Hamadeh. Hizballah does not hide the fact that it receives a great deal of funding from Iran because this funding is not a political liability. Lebanese Shia benefit materially from Iranian financing of Hizballah and do not seem to acknowledge the irony of railing against US/Western influence but not against Iranian influence. (Comment: Hamadeh best summarized Shia sentiment towards Iran in a comment to us last year, saying "the Shia are not allergic to Iran." End comment.)

¶6. (C) Hamadeh then explored another angle to Hizballah's links to Iran and to the party's political actions in the last few months. He explained that the vast majority of the Shia community appears to be behind any decision Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah takes, even if it is

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dangerous to the Shia community, defies logic, or appears to be made in Tehran and Damascus. The cult of personality around Nasrallah has grown so fervent that Hamadeh believes Nasrallah could misstep or overreach, and the majority of the Shia community would still follow. As a specific example, Hamadeh cited Hizballah's close ties to Palestinian militant groups. The Palestinians in Lebanon are an unpopular group (given their role in the civil war and status as refugees), but there is no criticism in the Shia community for Nasrallah's support for their cause and their rights.

#### INDEPENDENT SHIA SAY HIZBALLAH WILL ONLY DISRUPT CABINET

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¶7. (C) In separate meetings on February 2, independent Shia politician Ahmad el-Assaad from south Lebanon and former Shia MP Salah Harake from south Beirut each told econoff that Hizballah's support in the Shia community is strong and getting stronger with the confessional tensions. El-Assaad estimated the Amal-Hizballah alliance would garner about 70 percent of the Shia vote if elections were held now, while

Harake thought the percentage for Amal-Hizballah would be closer to 90 percent. Amal has become largely irrelevant as it has been subsumed by Hizballah, according to el-Assaad and Harake.

18. (C) Both el-Assaad and Harake said that the best solution for Siniora is to entice Aoun into the cabinet and to replace the Shia ministers nominated by the Amal-Hizballah alliance. El-Assaad hinted that he would be willing to take over a Shia cabinet seat vacated by a Hizballah-nominated minister. He claimed his name had been raised during the height of the Shia cabinet boycott. For his part, Harake said that he had discussed the cabinet boycott with Hizballah officials and had come to the conclusion that Hizballah will not play a constructive role in government. Hizballah officials told him that their goal is to exercise full veto power over any cabinet decision. It would be best to remove Hizballah from the government as it will only be disruptive to Siniora's efforts, concluded Harake.

COMMENT

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19. (C) It should be noted that the three Shia politicians interviewed by econoff do not, by their own admission, represent the majority of Shia in Lebanon. They are too moderate and secular. Ahmad el-Assaad's willingness to risk being labeled a "Brutus" is admirable, but a cabinet appointment may also be his only avenue to political power. However, they are plugged into the Shi community, and the fact that they have separately come to the conclusion that Hizballah will use its cabinet access to disrupt progress and dialogue bodes ill for cabinet unity. We also note that the suggestion that Siniora drop Hizballah in favor of Aoun's participation in the cabinet was tabled before Michel Aoun's 2/6 meeting and press conference with Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. End comment.

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